UNITED
NATIONS

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Economic and Social
Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.4/1999/89
22 December 1998

Original: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Fifty-fifth session
Item 17 (d) of the provisional agenda

PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS: SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT

Report of the Secretary-General submitted in accordance with Commission decision 1997/102

Introduction

1. At its fifty-third session, the Commission on Human Rights adopted decision 1997/102, in which it invited the Secretary-General to bring his reports (contained in documents E/CN.4/1996/23 and Add.1 and E/CN.4/1997/18) on the question of human rights and the environment and the Commission's own consideration of this question to the attention of the General Assembly's special session on Agenda 21, the Commission on Sustainable Development, the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Development Programme and other relevant international bodies and organizations. The Secretary-General was also requested to prepare a consolidated report based on the deliberations of the General Assembly and of those international bodies and organizations for consideration of the question of human rights and the environment by the Commission on Human Rights at its fifty-fifth session.

2. In accordance with that request, the Secretary-General addressed a letter to the Commission on Sustainable Development, the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, the Division for the Advancement of Women of the Secretariat, the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the Secretariats of the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, the World Food Programme and the World Meteorological Organization on 19 May 1998, followed by a reminder on 12 October 1998, inviting their comments on the above-mentioned reports and on the deliberations of the General Assembly.

GE.98-05268 (E)

3. As of 8 December 1998, only one reply had been received, from FAO. That reply has been summarized below.

4. The present report provides, in addition to FAO's reply, a succinct analysis of subjects of common interest and concern in respect of human rights, environmental issues and sustainable development as reflected in the deliberations of the General Assembly's nineteenth special session on Agenda 21 held from 23-28 June 1997. 1/

I. COMMENTS SUBMITTED BY UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENTS AND BODIES

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

[Original: English]
[19 August 1998]

5. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) considered the reports of the Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment as being too academic in nature and lacking pragmatic policy recommendations that could be implemented at the field level. Politico-economic and cultural constraints to increased participation, especially by the marginalized segments of society in decision-making processes, should be addressed as a top priority; such participation has been a primary focus of Agenda 21.

6. Comments were also provided to highlight FAO's particular interest in the relationship between systematic discrimination against women with respect to the development process and the environment, recalling that the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action recognized that poverty and environmental degradation were closely interrelated.

7. As the world's primary food producers, women played an important role in the preservation of the environment and in environmentally sustainable development. However, the lack of security of land ownership and tenure and the lack of access to agricultural resources, including credits to purchase less environmentally damaging technologies, limited women farmers' choices, thus contributing to the environment's further degradation.

8. FAO warned that unless environmentally sound practices were introduced on a large scale, the growth of the agricultural sector would only be short term. Women farmers, as subsistence food producers, were likely to be the worst hit.

9. Referring to resolution 42/1 on human rights and land rights discrimination adopted by the Commission on the Status of Women at its forty-second session, FAO formulated a number of recommendations aimed at the improvement of women's access to agricultural resources and facilities for

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1/ See Report of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Whole of the Nineteenth Special Session (A/S-19/29).

their participation in credit schemes, the need to establish a mechanism to implement prevailing legislation in regard to land rights and ensure equal access to land titles for both women and men, particularly female-headed households, as well as legal literacy and technical training programmes on environmentally sound farming practices for rural women.

II. SUBJECTS OF COMMON INTEREST AND CONCERN IN RESPECT OF HUMAN RIGHTS, ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS REFLECTED IN THE DELIBERATIONS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY AT ITS NINETEENTH SPECIAL SESSION

10. The Ad Hoc Committee of the Whole of the Nineteenth Special Session of the General Assembly referred to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development as a landmark event which had launched a new global partnership for sustainable development, a partnership which respected the indivisibility of environmental protection and the development process.

11. Having reviewed the progress achieved in the implementation of the commitments made at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development over the past five years, the Ad Hoc Committee highlighted a number of areas, particularly areas of a cross-sectoral nature the implementation of which required urgent action, and proposed strategies for accelerating progress towards sustainable development.

12. In this context, the Ad Hoc Committee noted the need for a greater integration at all policy-making levels - economic, social and environmental - and at operational levels, including the lowest administrative levels possible. The following areas of environmental and human rights concerns were developed in the report of the Ad Hoc Committee under the chapter dealing with the integration of economic, social and environmental objectives:

An enabling international economic climate

13. Although globalization presents new opportunities and challenges, only a limited number of developing countries have been able to take advantage of recent trends, attracting large inflows of external private capital and experiencing significant export-led growth and acceleration of growth in per capita gross domestic product (GDP). African countries and the least developed countries, in particular, have shown slow or negative growth and continue to be marginalized due to poverty-related problems, low levels of social development, inadequate infrastructure and lack of capital.

14. As a result of globalization, external factors have become critical in determining the success or failure of developing countries in their national efforts. Thus, the Ad Hoc Committee placed a particular emphasis on the need for a mutually supportive balance between the international and the national environment in the pursuit of sustainable development and for a dynamic and enabling international economic environment supportive of international cooperation, particularly in the fields of finance, technology transfer and debt and trade.

Eradicating poverty

15. The full integration of people living in poverty into economic, social and political life and the empowerment of women were underlined as critical factors for the eradication of poverty. The provision of basic social services and food security in an equitable manner is a necessary precondition for such integration and empowerment.

16. Priority actions recommended by the Ad Hoc Committee in terms of poverty alleviation included: providing universal access to basic social services, including basic education, health care, nutrition, safe water and sanitation; progressively developing social protection systems to protect those who are not in a position to protect themselves; addressing the disproportionate impact of poverty on women, in particular by removing legislative, policy, administrative and customary barriers to women's equal access to productive resources and credit; increasing the share of official development assistance (ODA) for poverty eradication; encouraging an effective application of the 20/20 initiative and intensifying international cooperation to support measures undertaken by developing countries to eradicate poverty within an integral and multidimensional approach.

Population

17. Recognizing the interrelationship between economic growth, poverty, employment, environment and sustainable development, the Ad Hoc Committee stressed the need to encourage and promote the current decline in population growth through the expansion of basic education, with full and equal access for girls and women to health care, including reproductive health care and family planning.

Health

18. Given the clear linkage between health and environmental conditions, the lack of information on the two subjects should be addressed in an integrated and coherent manner in the framework of national and subnational sustainable development plans. Besides, health issues should be incorporated into development programmes as a component of environmental assessment.

19. The Ad Hoc Committee called for support to countries' and international organizations' efforts to eradicate the major infectious diseases, to improve and expand basic health services and to provide safe drinking water. It was also necessary to take adequate measures to reduce indigenous cases of vaccine-preventable diseases through the promotion of widespread immunization programmes, promote accelerated research and reduce the transmission of other major infectious diseases. Other environmental health risks such as unsafe uses of lead, tobacco and ambient and indoor air pollution need to be adequately addressed in local, national and regional preventive strategies with a view to reducing their potential effects.

Sustainable human settlements

20. Reference was made to urban concerns as common concerns for both industrialized and developing countries. As a cross-sectoral phenomenon,

global urbanization has had an impact on all aspects of sustainable development. New and additional resources are needed to implement the goals set up by the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlement (Habitat II), and in Agenda 21.

21. Solutions to achieve more sustainable human settlements development could be envisaged through the transfer of expertise and technology, capacity-building, decentralization of authority, through, inter alia, strengthening of local capacity and private-public partnership to improve the provision and environmentally sound management of infrastructure and social services.

Fresh water

22. Fresh water and hazardous wastes were identified by the Ad Hoc Committee as part of several specific areas that are of widespread concern since failure to reverse current trends in these areas, notably in resource degradation, will have disastrous effects on social and economic development, on human health and on environmental protection for all countries, particularly developing countries.

23. The Ad Hoc Committee deplored that more than one fifth of all people still do not have access to safe drinking water and more than one half of humanity lacks adequate sanitation. Concern was expressed regarding the increasing stress on water supplies caused by unsustainable use patterns, affecting both water quality and quantity, and the widespread lack of access to safe water supply and suitable sanitation in many developing countries.

24. A wide range of recommendations have been formulated with a view to ensuring the optimal use and protection of all fresh-water resources to meet the needs of everyone on the planet including: granting high priority to the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes for integrated watershed management; strengthening regional and international cooperation for technological transfer and the financing of integrated water resource programmes and projects; providing enabling national and international environment to encourage public and private investments; and the recognition of water as a social and economic good with a vital role in the satisfaction of basic human needs, food security, poverty alleviation and the protection of ecosystems. In this connection, due consideration should be given to the promotion of the harmonious management and development of scarce water resources and to generating financial resources for investment and treatment facilities, notably in developing countries.

Hazardous wastes

25. While commending the substantial progress in the implementation of the Basel Convention, the Fourth Lomé Convention and other regional conventions the Ad Hoc Committee pointed to the urgency of defining the type of hazardous wastes controlled under the Basel Convention and to negotiate, adopt and implement a protocol on liability and compensation for damage resulting from the transboundary movement and disposal of hazardous wastes. Integrated management solutions were also recommended to minimize urban and industrial waste generation and to promote recycling and re-use.

III. ROLE OF RELEVANT ORGANIZATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

26. The Ad Hoc Committee called on all organizations and programmes of the United Nations system, within their respective areas, to strengthen, individually and jointly, the support for national efforts to implement Agenda 21 and to make their efforts and actions consistent with national plans, policies and priorities of Member States.